Our Faith

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Universal Religion

JOINT EDITORIAL

At a Star Island conference last summer five ministers (Dilworth Lupton, Frank E. Smith, Leon C. Fay, Raymond B. Johnson, and Robert C. Palmer) drew up a statement of what they thought should be "the essential attitudes of a Unitarian church." The conference was run by the Religious Education Department of the American Unitarian Association, and the statement happens to embody the position usually taken, we are sorry to say, in the material prepared for our Sunday Schools by that department. But never has this position been given out in a formal statement like the one now before us.

Since the circulation of the statement in August other ministers have signed it. On September 27, when Commissioner Long of the State Bureau of Corporations held a hearing on the question of changing the name of the General Alliance, one of the women in favor of the change spoke on behalf of the ministers who had signed the statement, which she read to the Commissioner. She said that the ministers who had signed it were against retaining the Christian label; they wanted a name broad enough to include, among others, those who were "Atheists."

The statement reads: "We believe in universal religion which is greater than any of its present organized expressions at their best, greater than Hinduism, Judaism, or Christianity. We believe in a universal church where theists, humanists, Christians, Jews and all religious truth-seekers may come together, each contributing to the common enrichment of their church. We believe in the development of this universal religion in order to break down today's tensions and so forward the sense of world community so desperately needed. We believe in the right of each individual to his own convictions. We believe that the Unitarian movement should re-affirm its tradition of a creedless church and begin immediately to create and foster such fellowships of universal religion. We pledge our efforts to this great Unitarian cause."

It will be noticed that in the first sentence Hinduism, which is the socio-religious system of India, and peculiarly national, is included among the "present organized expressions" of "universal religion." And the two international religions, Buddhism and Islamism, are not included.

It will be further noticed that the fourth sentence expresses a truism, for no individual could possibly have a right to anyone's opinion but "his own." If it is not a truism, it envisages a church in which no two members need agree on anything. Such a church could never come to be established.

The intention of the whole statement is to turn our churches into cells of a "universal religion" which will ignore the Christian bonds that bind us together. This makes their effort divisive. The Purpose of the Unitarian Association to which the ministers' churches belong mentions no religious teacher but Jesus, and includes such Christian terms as "church" and the "kingdom of God." While these terms are Christian, at the same time no one could possibly conceive anything more universal than the kingdom of God.

Also the Purpose of the Association declares that "pure religion" includes "love to God." The essential divisiveness of the new statement is seen in its anticipation that in the proposed fellowships of "universal religion" no member need believe in God. When they contemplate purely ethical societies as possible upholders of the "great Unitarian cause" they are

certainly using the word "Unitarian" in a distorted and unhistorical manner.

Beyond a flurry of divisiveness, it is difficult to understand what the drafters of the statement hope to accomplish. They give no positive affirmation as to what their "universal religion" is to contain. They speak of "fellowships of universal religion" but do not say what is to bind together the individuals within the fellowships. Lukewarm believers along with lukewarm disbelievers cannot form a meaningful fellowship. A "universal church" would have to be dedicated to something, and if the word "church" is not being used with tongue in cheek, it would have to be dedicated to the worship and work of God.

Women's Alliance Remains "Christian" ?

As indicated in last month's issue, a majority of delegates present and voting at the Annual Meeting of the General Alliance last May did not vote in favor of either of the proposed new names.

Of the two new names proposed 211 voted for "Unitarian Women's Alliance." The number of votes cast was 422. The number of delegates present was 442.

In addition to the votes cast at the meeting ninety-five women not present had written in and fifty-four of them had expressed themselves in favor of the same new name. These ninety-five were not present to hear the discussion. Their votes gave a majority of seven for the new name.

In the By-Laws of the Alliance Article I states: "This society shall be called General Alliance of Unitarian and Other Liberal Christian Women." Article XII of the same By-Laws reads: "These By-Laws may be amended at any annual or special meeting of the General Alliance by a vote of not less than two-thirds of the life members and delegates accredited thereto."

The number of life members and accredited delegates this year was 985. Two-thirds of 985 is 657. The number who voted for changing the name to "Unitarian Women's Alliance" was 265 in all.

Subsequently the General Alliance applied to the Massachusetts Commissioner of Corporations for permission to change the name. He has discretionary powers to grant such permission although only a small majority may favor it.

On September 27, there was a hearing on the subject at the office of the Commissioner. After listening to what those present had to say he indicated his desire not to injure the morale of the Alliance by any decision on his part, and expressed the hope that the matter be settled within the ranks of the Alliance itself.

For this hope to be fulfilled the Alliance will have to withdraw the petition at this time and only renew it if and when there is more unanimity on the matter within the Alliance itself.

Liquidating Christianity

"Is a Unitarian minister ordained to preside at the liquidation of Unitarian Christianity?" asked Dr. Alexander Szent-Ivanyi in the course of a stirring address before the Unitarian Christian Fellowship in Boston. "Or, rather, is he ordained to suggest and promote that liquidation?"

"An attack against Christianity from outside, by Communists, militant atheists, or rival religions, does not hurt Christianity; rather it unites it, makes it more devoted. But an attack from the inside is demoralizing and provides our enemies with an opportunity to berate our Western Civilization as decadent. Whatever we say today about ourselves as Unitarians, for four hundred years now Unitarianism has been considered to belong to Christianity. Neither the two Sozzini, nor Francis David, Servetus, Lindsey and Martineau, neither Priestley, Channing, Parker nor Emerson, nor any other great Unitarian ever considered himself anything but Christian. If, therefore, Unitarians begin to promote the 'liquidation of Christianity,' it might very well be considered a subversive attack from the inside, a stab in the back against the valiantly fighting defenders of the walls."

"During those four long centuries," continued Dr. Szent-Ivanyi, "other denominations regarded Unitarians with suspicion, doubting their sincerity and questioning their good intentions. But as times became critical, as National Socialism on the one hand and Soviet Communism on the other opened devastating fire on Christianity, Unitarians here and there found ample opportunity to show their true color, and other denominations discovered that Christianity is more than this or that dogma. The result was that Unitarians

began to be considered trustworthy and were invited to and included in the struggle for common defense."

After telling of his experiences in inter-church co-operation as leader of the Unitarians in Hungary, Dr. Szent-Ivanyi spoke of similar co-operation in the experience of the Dutch and Swiss Liberals, and the British Unitarians. And in the United States, "we are not only accepted but invited and urged to be members of most local Protestant ministerial unions. Our Alliances are welcome members of Protestant State Women's organizations. It is not a condescending toleration of Unitarians which we see active in the world today; there is a growing and genuine desire for co-operation with us among our fellow-Christians. Our brother Protestants want us to show them what our best representatives endeavored to point out for four centuries; that is how Christianity can be reformed among the conflicting and warring ideologies of our day. This inclusive tendency is the historic opportunity which our martyrs and spiritual leaders longed for in the past. This opportunity to put our ideas to a test of the times within organized Christianity could be the crowning point for all the suffering, striving, dreaming and expectations of the centuries of our history.

"It is this historic opportunity which is endangered by those who renounce Christianity. Indeed the very name of Unitarianism is in danger of becoming defamed for centuries to come. Friendly Christians who fight for our admission to the World Council of Churches, hospitable Christians who urge us with real brotherly feeling to join Protestant ministerial unions, confessors and martyrs of Christianity in Russian forced-labor camps, underground Christians in the Ukraine, White Russia and the satellite countries—all these might legitimately raise the voice of indignation in this hour of trial against the 'deceitfulness of these Unitarians.'

" 'For centuries,' they might well say, 'you Unitarians insisted that you were Christians, that all you wanted to do was to restore Christianity to its original splendor in the teachings of Jesus Christ, that you wanted to help us to reform Christianity from the inside. And now, when we finally believe you, now when the best among us are fighting for your full-scale acceptance within the fold, now when it is generally accepted among us that the Unitarians are just as good Christians as the rest of us, now you come out in your true colors. You stab us in the back while we face the Antichrist in desperate battle, you demoralize our ranks and you inflate the hopes of the enemy by sponsoring a fight for the liquidation of Christianity.'

"All this they might very well say, and they might very well be right. . . ."

A New Unitarian Christian Church

A group of members of the All Souls Unitarian Church, Indianapolis, withdrew last spring and established the "North Unitarian Church." They have been meeting in the music room of the Orchard School and the services have been conducted by various educators from neighboring colleges who have specialized in the teaching of religion.

The establishment of this newly incorporated Unitarian church was not "news" from the present standpoint of the American Unitarian Association's official organ, the *Christian Register*. So to spread the news about it the president of the Board of Trustees, Minton S. Nelson (125 East 49th St.), sent out a circular letter.

Mr. Nelson gives the chief reasons why they have separated from their mother church. "First," he writes, "we feel that the church—as a church—has a unique and sacred function to perform—the teaching of the fundamental history of the Christian Church which is our religious heritage, and the application of those teachings for Unitarians in a modern society. . . . The church should cling to its function as a power-house of Christian ethical teachings, where idealism and enthusiasm are generated, sending its individuals out to serve their fellowmen." In the Sunday School, he adds, children should be given "adequate knowledge and proper appreciation of and reverence for Christian tradition, as well as training in character building."

This new church will allow a choice of theological viewpoint. Concerning it, Filomena Gould writes in the *Indianapolis News* that there is a likeness between this group and the original group that established All Souls Church forty-six years ago. Indeed, among those who have withdrawn from All Souls some were members of the original group and others are their descendants. "They are convinced that they are carrying on the purposes and spirit which made the earlier group a force in the community."

The Function of a Church

ROWLAND GRAY-SMITH
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I imagine that any statement regarding the purpose of a church should, if it is to be comprehensive, find room for reference to the three aspects of human nature, the intellectual, the esthetic, and the ethical, and should intimate what the church has to offer in the way of truth for the mind, satisfaction for the feelings, and guidance for action.

With those requirements in mind, the following statement is offered as the briefest possible verbal formulation of the church's purpose or function: *To promote religious truth as it is found in Jesus, divine worship in the fellowship of love, and human good in the spirit of community.*

In the first place, it is the function of the church *to promote religious truth.* This is something very different from "searching for truth." The search for truth is primarily the function of pure science. In all its branches science is continually making discoveries. But as the books containing new knowledge increase in number, it becomes increasingly difficult for any one person to read them all. To equate such a "search for truth" with being religious reduces religion to an absurdity. This is not to say there is no connection between science and religion. The religious aspect of science is seen in the unshakeable faith with which the scientist begins and not in the ever incomplete information he acquires.

The church's concern is with such truth as may reasonably be called religious. And happily, there is a full measure of religious truth readily available. Within Christendom no religious teacher has surpassed the one who gives his name to our era. And whether it is Ghandi in India or Kagawa in Japan, or any man anywhere who cares to acquaint himself with the truth as it is in Buddha or Kung-fu-tse or Mohammed or in any other, there is none but would be immeasurably impoverished if he did not have such *religious truth as is found in Jesus.* And inasmuch as we find the best in him, it is our privilege zealously to propagate it as what seems to us the most elevated religious truth history has disclosed.

Secondly, there is the esthetic aspect of our nature. Religion has often evoked enchanting artistic expression. And today no normal service of worship is untouched by the appeal of architecture, the grace of music, and the stimulus of poetry. But this art is not for its own sake. It is to elevate the spirit above the commonplace and to render it worshipful.

Religion at its best attempts to satisfy human feeling at its deepest through *divine worship in the fellowship of love.* This is worship cleansed of nameless fear, enjoyed with one's fellows, and permeated by the loftiest emotion. This is Christian worship, and it yields esthetic joy in its finest and most wholesome form.

Finally, the church promotes *human good in the spirit of community.* Human good is nothing more than the world's ethical teachers have sought to promote. But how is its promotion to become an enthusiasm? It becomes so by the apprehension of the best *religious truth as it is found in Jesus,* and by the stimulus and power of *divine worship in the fellowship of love.* Man is bound to man on the highest plane of thought and in the deepest intimacy of shared feeling, and the individuality of each is lost and found in the spirit of community.

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